

CARLOS GAMERRO

RESIDENT THINKER OF NOWHEREISLAND

Introduction by Carlos Gamerro

“An island thrown aside from human use, stormy in winter, barren in summer; an island which not even the southern savages have dignified with habitation, where a garrison must be kept in a state that contemplates with envy the exiles of Siberia,” thus wrote Samuel Johnson of the Malvinas-Falklands in 1771. Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges famously described the war England and Argentina fought over them in 1982 as “the fight of two bald men over a comb.” Separated from the British Isles by thousands of miles of ocean, from nearby Argentina by the policies of the British government and the desires of their some 3,000 inhabitants, these islands can be said to belong to nowhere, and one could only wish they could be unmoored and towed back and forth along the oceans of the world, with perhaps a few English and Argentine ships in hot pursuit as the Pequod pursued Moby-Dick over the oceans of the world, only to be shattered and sunk by him.

*But there are those who love these “miserable islands” (we switch to Darwin, now). The Islanders, of course, are attached to the land they were born and grew up in. But those who suffered most in them, the Argentine conscripts who for two endless months had to endure the harsh winter climate, permanent hunger, the mistreatment of their officers and, eventually, shelling and trench warfare, have also become attached to this forbidding terrain, which took so much away, and gave them nothing in return: they became, upon their return to the Argentine continent, exiles in their own land. In my novel *The Islands*, that takes place ten years after the war, some of them are still plotting to go back, as if their return would be enough to turn the waste land into an Eden, or have found ways of recreating the islands of their dreams in some secret corner of their daily lives.*

Extract from Chapter 2 ‘The Cordobese Armadillo’ of *The Islands* (trans. Ian Barnett) published by *And Other Stories*, May 2012

His smile was the last thing I saw before the darkness of his cellar swallowed him up.

‘Bulb’s gone.’ His voice reached me over the noise of his feet taking two steps at a time before I’d even dared to set foot on the first. I was still groping my way down along the peeling wall when I heard him reach the bottom and flick the switch, filling the enormous chamber with the light of a sudden dawn.

Sometimes when, after a sleepless night rocked by the constant shuddering of the bombs, we’d see the first blue light of day from the hill washing across the implacable sky and gratefully drop dead for a measly hour’s sleep, we’d awaken later in the morning to see the same view that greeted me now, as if the ten intervening years had been just a passing dream of that brief hour of peace. Before my eyes, as I looked on from the top of the stairs, nestling between the smooth, stretched sheet of the bay and the semicircle of hills that surrounded it like plumped pillows, were dotted the two hundred-odd houses of the Islands’ ephemeral and eternal capital, the town of Puerto Argentino, as it might have looked to a passing gull one quiet late-April morning, when there were still no craters, no gutted buildings with their insides on view, no torn-up trees heralding the arrival of history in the town.

‘Whoa!’ I exclaimed. ‘It’s exactly the same.’

Ignacio turned round and smiled. He'd gone red.

'Looking good, isn't it,' he said, gazing at it again, as if in its presence he were only allowed to take his eyes off it for a few brief seconds.

Descending the remaining stairs, I put my arm round his shoulder and once again we gazed upon it together. He'd reproduced the houses identically one by one, erecting walls of cardboard or glued matchsticks, painting them white or yellow, roofing them with aluminium from beer cans in blue, red or green. 'Corrugated,' he explained proudly, 'with a fork.' Between each garden – or rather, vegetable patch – he'd set up fences of foam rubber, which also grew in the tops of the town's few trees – the only ones on the island. I could easily recognise the two churches, the dance hall, the post office, the Governor's house . . . Tiny soldiers stood guard in defences camouflaged with gauze, dyed – as he eagerly pointed out – with coffee dregs and surrounded by snarls of wire knotted at regular intervals to simulate the barbs, or directed their still sceptical eyes at the virgin sky painted on the basement ceiling and walls, at the neat foxholes dug in the papier mâché hills, or from the snaking contour of the Avenida Ross and its three straight jetties to the calm, corrugated-nylon waters of the shiiless bay. He'd managed to find jeeps and tanks and anti-aircraft cannon that looked almost identical to the originals, models of plastic or lead that he'd carefully hand-painted himself. A Lockheed Hercules, like the one that flew us to the Islands, was unloading military supplies at the southern tip of the airport, and on every hill, following either orders or routine, the conscripts were digging trenches: the Correntinos of R4 among the crags of Enriqueta and Dos Hermanas; the marine infantry on Tumbledown, William and Zapador; the R7 perched on the edges of Wireless Ridge and Longdon. It was just like being back in the Islands.

'Remember?' Ignacio said to me as he ran from one end to the other. 'This was where Diego got hit.'

'You've got the peat just right,' I said pointing to the open ground between the town and the rocky hillsides.

'Touch it,' he said to me with the smile of a proud father.

I touched it, and my finger sank in the soft terrain, the hollow immediately filling with brackish water.

'Ohh! It's just like the real thing! How did you do it?'

'Foam rubber, covered by a layer of soil and yerba maté. I spray it occasionally to keep it waterlogged. The yerba's for luck,' he winked at me. 'Says the land's one hundred per cent Argentinian.'

He ran beside me as I strolled around it, eagerly drawing my attention to any details I might have overlooked, pointing and gesticulating at every rock, every dry stream, every flock of sheep, every minefield. Ignacio wasn't built for generalities; everything was fiercely individual, every element had been created by his own hand and was unique and irreplaceable. 'Was that the shape of those rocks, the hotel windows, this corner?' he kept asking me and I kept repeating yes, yes, yes, as if it were possible to remember. No one, not even the Kelpers themselves, knew this area of the Islands better than he did. 'I'll be an invaluable aid when we go back,' he kept repeating while I committed the layout of the coastal defences, the approach roads to the town, the radar stations to memory. 'They'll have to put me in charge of strategy. We could bomb Stanley into the ground and rebuild Puerto Argentino from my model, with the added advantage that we'd get rid of all the changes it must have suffered over the last ten years. I've even put Kelpers, look.' All that differentiated the little figures were tiny daubs of red or yellow that stood out against the general olive green, but Kelpers they were. 'They'll be replaced by Argentinian settlers one day.'

At first we'd thought it was absurd that he should go to so much trouble to build something that would be razed to the ground in a mock battle in a single day, but he was so

enthusiastic that we just let him get on with it. 'It'll be much better if you wait a bit, lads. What's the fun in doing it all in a rush like that?' he'd say, but by then it was obvious he was trying to buy time. His excuse was always the need to extend the model. 'What do you mean we aren't going to include Dos Hermanas, eh? They earned it R4 did.' The four walls of the cellar soon left him without an argument. He spent a couple of desperate months planning how to saw to pieces what he'd done so far and rebuild it somewhere with unlimited potential for territorial expansion, but everyone suspected that the project would be prolonged indefinitely that way, and no one gave him any support. 'Be realistic,' we told him. So then he tried another tack. Until then it had been a vague scheme, with cardboard boxes instead of houses, and plasticine vehicles: a three-dimensional model that was only of any use for replaying the war and reshuffling alternatives. His new undertaking was on a far vaster scale: he wanted to exactly reproduce every stone, every window, every fence, every participant; to capture, as in a high-res satellite photograph, every detail of that April morning when war was still a remote possibility, and hold up the perfection of his model as a lucky charm against its arrival. Ignacio had discovered quite intuitively that space is infinitely divisible and that, as long as you keep on dividing, you can make time stand still. There would always be some detail to add to the increasingly perfect reproduction of that eternal 30th April, and until that day reached its fruition, 1st May would have to wait. He became obsessive. He began to read book after book, to visit the houses of ex-combatants one by one asking them for photos or letters and grilling them for hours: 'So there were two cypresses here, this high? And this house's vegetable patch was well tended? What colour was the store sign?' He'd spend hours mixing pigments on a palette to get the exact tones; he rehearsed for weeks with filters and spotlights to achieve 'the precise effect of shadows and reflections created by the southern light at that time of day.' And when he suggested reproducing the houses' *interiors* through the cellophane windows, we had to threaten to cut off his funding. 'But what sense does it make to retake the town, lads, if it isn't the *same* one?' he'd argue, but we were adamant. 'Two more years waiting for you to touch up some fat Kelper bint on the crapper? You're losing yourself in the details, mate. Can't see the cunt for the pubes,' we'd reply. 'You don't understand, you don't understand,' he'd mutter, but I had begun to understand. He'd come to love his town so much that the real one had ceased to matter to him.

'If you'd give me unlimited funds and a team of men under my command,' he repeated now, resting his hands on the cruel edge reality had imposed on his world, 'I could go on to complete the whole island. It isn't like it was before: we've got maps, knowledge of the terrain . . . The other island would be child's play after that. I can make them so perfect nobody'd notice the difference. Can you imagine? We could open a Disney-style Malvinas World. And when they get started on the Malvinas war films, then they'll come knocking, you'll see.'

He looked at me with wide eyes and trembling smile, begging me not to destroy the dream in two words, perhaps hoping that after my visit I'd persuade the others of the need to wait as long as it would take. I imagine that at some stage, out of sheer desperation, he considered using the old ruse of undoing at night what he'd built during the day, but he must have realised how useless that would prove: it wasn't us he wanted to cheat, but time itself. The town, which had lasted just seventy-four days, would attain eternal life through him, and I was standing before someone who'd found a purpose in life and given himself to it body and soul, to the exclusion of all else, rejecting other realities as illusory, deaf to any voices but the ones that reached him from the shores of his promised land. It made me envious and I decided to get my own back.

'If you ask me, it's done,' I said.

He fell back on the creator's stock excuse.

'Maybe for you. You see it from the outside, you only go by appearances. But only I can tell when it's really finished.'

'And what will you do when we stop sending you funds?'

His face looked like someone had just twisted his arm, and his eyes filled with tears.

'You too, Felipe . . .?'

'You know there are people who've gone hungry to support you over this. But the idea was always to use it to plan the recovery. You're perverting a collective project for purely personal ends.'

It was as easy and risk-free as making a child suffer.

'How can you say that, Felipe?' he said tearfully. 'Look at us standing here together,' he said, pointing at the barricade of old tyres and the blue-and-white house where we'd sometimes had to stand guard. Alongside Ignacio and myself were Sergio and Tomás, and we were eating something apparently and drinking maté all together, chatting and having a good time, hoping upon hope that the conversation would never end, as if we knew what was in store for us. 'They just want to scare us. You'll see, everything'll sort itself out without a shot being fired,' Tomás would repeat to us, world without end, like a mantra against the first screams falling from the sky, and we'd nod, confident that the mere repetition of sounds would be enough to stop time and make his words come true.

'The tyres are good. How did you make them?'

He smiled proudly, wiping away a tear on his sleeve.

'Polo mints and dirty fingers. And the best thing is you don't need glue.'

'Another display of Argentinian ingenuity,' I acknowledged. 'But you're straying from the facts,' I said, pointing at myself. 'I was locked away with the radio all the time. They had me translating the BBC all day.'

'What do you want me to do, put you inside where no one can see you? There's no pleasing you bastards. Ramiro's already driven me bonkers about putting a 12.7-mm machine gun on Enriqueta, when he never actually set foot out of town or ever carried more than a twisted old FAL. Look, there he is, otherwise I'd have had to give him the money back. Ah well, I've no objections. Now at last we get to choose. That's why I put us all together, Felipe. Even if you get annoyed with me and don't want to see me anymore, here at least we'll go on being friends forever,' he said, and smiled in such a way that I couldn't help being moved.

'Actually, it looks great,' I admitted, won over to his cause once again. 'I'll see if I can talk the lads into giving you an extension. It can't be forever, mind,' I warned him, but I think he only heard the first half. He was so desperate that every day gained savoured of eternity.

I hung around a long time, locating the vague and disembodied memories of ten years ago in the model's network of precise distances and ratios, asking questions, recording details. I took with me a pile of books and magazines, staggering under their weight, and, at the top of the stairs, before I disappeared into the night with my burden, Ignacio, showing he *had* been listening till the end, shouted to me from below.

'If you can't persuade them,' he said to me, 'I've got another message for them.'

'What?' I shouted.

'Tell them I shall defend my Islands whatever the cost may be. Tell them I shall never surrender.'

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